

# The Jewel



A novel of the life of  
Jean Armour and her husband,  
Robert Burns



Catherine  
Czerkawska

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Saraband 

## Chapter One

# Jeany

*There was a lass, and she was fair,  
At kirk or market to be seen;  
When a' our fairest maids were met,  
The fairest maid was bonnie Jean.*

The first time Jean Armour spoke to Rab Burns of Mossgiel, she was spreading linen on the bleach green. It was a fine day, but cold: one of those sharp, sunny days of early spring. There were catkins on the willows, buds on the trees, and the grass was green-ing up, but nothing was in leaf yet. You could see the light growing and feel the push of it in the ground. There was already a scatter-ing of golden blossoms on the whins, like a promise of something to come. Later the hedgerows would be ablaze with it.

‘When the whins are in bloom, kissing’s in season,’ the lads would chant, trying to catch her around her neat waist as she passed them by.

Jean had been spreading out the linen: sheets and shirts and tablecloths, including the big cloth that her mother kept for best, draping some of them over small shrubs and bushes so that the twigs would keep them in place. The frost was as good as the sun-light for bleaching linen. You would put it through the mangle to smooth the fibres and then spread it out for the frost or the sunlight or both, one following the other, to do their work, hop-ing that the birds wouldn’t do theirs on the newly washed sheets. Sometimes a lad could be persuaded to scare them away for a baw-bee or even a piece of bread and cheese, just held in his hand, if he was hungry enough. But all lads were hungry all the time. Her

father, James Armour, liked his shirts well laundered for the kirk, although it was hard when the house was so full of the stone dust that he brought indoors with him every evening.

Jean had begun later than usual, and the other lassies had already gone home. It was one of those days when the fire had refused to blaze up properly to heat the water, so she and her mother and sister had started the laundry late. Her mother blamed the chimney although her father said it was only when the wind blew a certain way. Now everything was late and like to get later. She was working alone on the green, spreading the linen over bushes and smoothing out the sheets on the grass, hoping that the weather wouldn't turn, that she hadn't missed the best of the day. As usual, she was singing to speed the work.

That was when Rab Mossgiel came walking along on his way to visit his landlord, or that's what she assumed, because he seemed to be heading in the direction of Gavin Hamilton's house. A young dog was at his heels, a collie, more black than white, half grown and skittish. Jean recollected that somebody had killed Rab's much loved dog, Luath, the night before his father died. That had been at Lochlea, the place where they had farmed before moving to Mossgiel, just outside the town of Mauchline. Somebody had killed the poor animal while Rab's father, William, lay at death's door, with his family gathered around his bedside.

She supposed this must be a replacement for Luath. Although Rab was careful to avoid the sheets and shirts, the dog, little more than a puppy, was not so cautious and ran over the linen after his master, leaving muddy paw-marks in its wake. The work involved in washing those sheets! She thought of her aching arms and the pride her mother took in the wash and her father's complaints about marks on his Sabbath shirts. What would he make of paw prints? Especially Rab Mossgiel's dog's paw prints.

'Away you go!' she shouted.

She picked up a pebble and threw it at the dog. Her aim was true, and the stone hit the dog on his rump, not really injuring

him, but stinging him, so that he sat down suddenly, turned around and bit repeatedly at himself as though a flea had nipped him there. Then he gazed at her, panting, one ear up and one ear down. He looked so comical that she couldn't help but laugh.

'Lassie, lassie!' said the young man with a sort of mock indignation. 'If you thought ought of me, you wadnae hurt my dog!'

His eyes were full of mischief. He was laughing and she was laughing and she raised her eyebrows and said, 'I wadnae think much of you at any rate, Rab Mossgiel!'

At the time she said it, it may even have been the truth. She couldn't have cared less about him, even though he made her laugh.

'That's me tellt then,' he said, pulling a rueful face.

She gazed at him, the sheet in her hand. He wore a light blue wool coat, home-spun and homemade too, she thought, but smart for all that. Long black hair, tied back and curling down over his collar. And a book in his hand. Well they were right about that. He aye had a book in his hand.

He'd moved to Mossgiel earlier that year. Most of them didn't yet call him Rab Mossgiel in the town because it was too soon, although she'd heard that's what he called himself, proud of his new farm. Rab's father, William, had used the old north-eastern family name of Burness, and Rab still spelled his name that way, although he was about to change it to plain Burns for reasons best known to himself. James Armour clearly thought that was just another affectation.

'Who does he think he is with his tied hair and his fancy plaid and his fancy manners?' he said, scathingly, when Jean mentioned the incident at home later that day.

Her mother had laughed and sung a few lines of a song:

*'Oh they gaed to Kirk and Fair,  
Wi' their ribbons round their hair,  
And their stumpie druggie coats,  
Quite the dandy O!'*

James had already made up his mind to dislike Rab, although there were many people of whom her father did not approve, so there was little wonder in that. The 'fancy plaid' was a yellowy brown colour that put you in mind of autumn leaves. He was wearing it now. Rab fastened it around his shoulders in a peculiar way, taking time and trouble to get it just right. The lad's reputation as something of a dandy had come to the town before him, so said Mr Auld the minister. He was known as Daddie Auld because he was practically built in with the stones of the kirk. Every town and village had its 'faither', the oldest and wisest man, but although Mr Auld was perhaps not the oldest, he was certainly deemed wisest. Rab did not have a very good reputation with the kirk elders, even though his new landlord, Mr Hamilton, seemed to like him well enough. But as her father said, that was no recommendation either, for Gavin Hamilton was not a God-fearing man. Jean was nineteen when the Burns family moved to Mossgiel, and she already knew all about the eldest son – that he was a lad best avoided by a lass like her, a lass with a good reputation to maintain.

\* \* \*

She had been a February baby, a dangerous time to be born, when the days were dark and sickness was rife. Spring and summer babies fared better as a rule. She was named for her mother's mother: Jean. Wee Jeany, her father called her, even when she was grown and not that wee any more. But she was strong and she thrived. They told her later that she sang before she spoke. Or rather sang and spoke at the same time, jiggling up and down on her mother's knee in time to the rhythm of the song. She was the apple of her father's eye. Stern and strict as he was, he softened whenever he gazed at her. Couldn't help himself.

'My lass,' he would call her, patting her head. 'My bonnie lass.'

Whenever anyone asked her what her father did for a living, she would say, 'He builds bridges,' which was, in a way, quite true. But it made him smile to hear her say it. James Armour was a

master mason in the parish of Mauchline, and he did build bridges and houses too – the fine houses of the gentry, Skeldon House and Dumfries House – but not always with his own two hands and not always the whole building. He contracted much of the work out to others, overseeing, supervising, but not above getting his hands dirty himself when occasion demanded it. The men he worked with feared him but always respected him. He had the hands of a working man, the stony dirt of years engrained there, the nails ragged and grimy, however much he washed them of an evening. When she thought about him, she remembered chiefly his big hand in hers, the roughness of it beneath her small fingers.

There were plenty of children in the Armour house on the busy Cowgate, and there was plenty of sickness too. She had lost five siblings, some when she was too young to feel more than a pang of sadness at the passing of the new baby sister or brother, an absence coupled with a mild sense of panic, mostly caused by her mother's misery and sudden silences. But all the while, whatever troubles came to their door, her father was steady, a beacon of good sense, trusting in his God through all his sorrows. She was sure of his love at least.

They were not exactly a rich household, but there was no shortage of money. When any of the children were really sick, the doctor came. But more often than not, his medicine was inadequate and the infants died anyway. Perhaps it made the survivors, Jean especially, all the more precious in their father's eyes. The more tragedy struck the family, the more he seemed to want to shield this dearly loved daughter from harm. She learned that lesson herself and never forgot it. But as a child, she took his love for granted.

They lived decently in a certain amount of comfort, with fuel for their fires, blankets and clean linen for their beds, and they always ate well, even at the lean and hungry times of year. They were no more cramped than any other house in the town and considerably warmer, far better off than most. James even paid for a good family pew in the body of the kirk, more than anyone else in the town, ten

shillings and eight pence every single year, even when times were hard. He paid for shawls and warm cloaks for winter; bought silks and cottons for best dresses for the women of the family, woollen coats for the men. The cobbler made leather shoes for Sundays so that nobody need be ashamed of being seen shoeless in the kirk.

The Mauchline folk knew who she was, Armour's eldest daughter who could sing like a lintie and dance too. Fleet of foot, whether shod or not, and light of heart.

'Jeany, can ye no be still?' her father would say in loving exasperation, but even then, he couldn't seem to help smiling at her. Looking back on her childhood, she could see that it had mostly been happy. She could picture herself running about the green with her friends. It was always summer in her mind's eye, and she seemed to be free from care. She had been a small person of some consequence in the town, with well made clothes to cover her back and, once past the commonplace dangers of infancy, the robust good health that came from the blessings of good food and a warm, dry home.

She had always loved to have nice things about her. Back then, of course, she accepted it as her due, but only later did she come to appreciate what a good provider James Armour must have been, never leaving her mother without the wherewithal to feed and clothe the family, always putting himself last, even though he was as fond of his dram as the next man. When his day's work was over, he would often take a drink with Johnnie Dow who owned the Whitefoord Arms along the road. But she had never seen her father the worse for drink. He knew when to stop. He was a canny man, a man of sound business sense.

'A good provider is worth a very great deal. A hungry care's an unco care,' as her mother was fond of saying.

Jean learned that lesson too, although she didn't always heed it as perhaps she should. Not once she had fallen acquainted with Rab. The first time Jean spoke to him rather than about him, that time at the bleach green, she had been singing while she worked. Her mother knew all the old songs, and from the moment when

her lips could utter recognisable words, Jean had been singing. She knew so many songs that she could hardly remember what she did know: songs for all seasons and none. They just came into her mind when she wanted them. Jean often found it easier to sing than to speak. Like many dark-haired people, she always found herself blushing easily, the crimson spreading upwards from her breast to her cheeks, impossible to disguise. It was hard to say what she thought or felt. The words would not come. But she could sing it all, and there was a song for every occasion. There were songs to speed the work, where the rhythm helped the hands and feet. There were songs to send a wean to sleep. There were songs to celebrate a birth and songs to mourn a death. There were songs to curse and songs to bless. Jean had never been able to count the songs she knew. But whenever they were needed, the words came easily off her tongue and the notes soared to the heavens.

It was a gift, this singing. Sometimes, on a winter's night, when the younger children were asleep, the house seemed too quiet, and it was then that James Armour would take down his old fiddle and play, telling Jean to sing for him, and she always did. She was pleased and proud, knowing that the good Lord had given her the gift of song and it was something to treasure and nothing of which she needed to be ashamed.

But there were some songs she didn't sing for her father.

These were the songs women sang, about the joys and sorrows of love and lovers and bonnie boys and birds in briar bushes and whaups in nests. These were what women sang when they were working together, perhaps in the dairy, or weaving and spinning, cooking or washing, especially when they were out of earshot of the men. There were songs about false lovers, men who slipped away from you at time of need like knotless threads, and songs to mock those same men, mercilessly. Jean knew that these were not songs for men, even though they were sometimes songs to heal a broken heart. They would bring a blush to her cheek if she sang them to a man. But she knew them all the same. And she sang them in the

company of other women or when she was alone.

She was singing as she was spreading her linen on the bleach green, an old song about a ploughman. *'The ploughman he's a bonnie lad, and a' his wark's at leisure, and when that he comes hame at e'en, he kisses me wi' pleasure!'*

She was singing when the dog ran over her fresh linen and she threw a chuckie stone and Rab stopped to remonstrate with her. The song died on her lips. She found herself blushing.

'If ye thought ought of me, ye wadnae hurt my dog!' he said.

And she answered him boldly enough, 'I wadnae think much of you at any rate, Rab Mossgiel,' but she could feel herself blushing even as she said it.

'That's me tellt,' he said. And then, 'But it would be a singular pleasure for this ploughman to kiss *you* for sure!' He bowed to her suddenly, mock gallant. 'My apologies for my dog and your linen, madam!'

And he was gone, striding onwards in the direction of Gavin Hamilton's house with the dog at his heels. He was whistling jauntily, not once pausing to look behind him. Oh, a fine conceit of himself that one.

The young man seemed to be full of self-love, a besetting sin for which James Armour could see no justification whatsoever; a young man whose reputation preceded him. Nobody in authority approved, although the lassies might admire from a distance as lassies always will admire such young men. As Jean found herself gazing after him now, and admiring this dangerous young man with jet black hair, snowy white wool stockings and a fine plaid, the colour of the woods in autumn.

The words of the song came unbidden into her head: *'When my ploughman comes hame at e'en, he's often wet and wearie. Cast aff the wet, put on the dry, and gae to bed my dearie.'*

She shook the sheet, impatient with herself as much as with him.

It meant nothing. He would have said as much to any young woman.